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# "I belong to me": Toni Morrison's Novels as Bildungsroman

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"I BELONG TO ME": TONI MORRISON'S  
NOVELS AS BILDUNGSROMAN

JONES

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"'I Belong to Me':

Toni Morrison's Novels as Bildungsroman

(TITLE)

BY

Angela L. Jones

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
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YEAR

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

"I Belong to Me": Toni Morrison's Novels as Bildungsroman

by

Angela L. Jones

The Bildungsroman, or novel of self-development, originated in Germany in the eighteenth century and enjoyed great popular success as it described the maturation of male characters. Lately, this type of novel has become very popular with women and minority authors as a method of describing characters who "come of age." Bonnie Hoover Braendlin states: "the Bildungsroman of these disenfranchised Americans . . . portrays the particular identity and adjustment problems of people whose sex or color renders them unacceptable to the dominant society" (75).

Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, editors of The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development, discuss the importance of the female Bildungsroman. They present four basic conditions necessary for a work to be a Bildungsroman: belief in a coherent self, faith in the possibility of development, a time span in which development occurs, and an emphasis on social context (14). Because most established social structures encourage men and discourage women in their respective developments, women must turn inward instead of outward to define their sense of self.

Black women writers are in an especially difficult position because they are themselves members of a group within

a group, a situation that particularly affects the social context in their works. They portray their characters as having to develop as both women and members of a minority group. Because these characters are shaped by both situations, each condition necessary for a Bildungsroman is altered. This situation of a definition within a definition makes the Bildungsroman an especially vital form to discuss the development of these characters.

For my thesis, I will examine the five novels of Toni Morrison (The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, and Beloved). I will first review the critical opinion of Song of Solomon as a Bildungsroman about a male character and discuss the ways in which Milkman Dead matures. I will then examine the self-development of Pecola, Sula and Nel, First Corinthians, Jadine, and Denver and compare and contrast Milkman's development with the development of these representative characters. Finally, I will examine the Bildungsroman itself and the common theme it provides in Morrison's five novels.

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## I: INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the novels of Toni Morrison, a twentieth-century black American woman, would seem to have little in common with the Bildungsroman, an eighteenth-century male-dominated European genre. However, Morrison's novels can be read as modern-day versions of this genre, describing the development of a sense of self in their characters. The Bildungsroman, or novel of self-development, originated in Germany in the eighteenth century and enjoyed great popular success. It emphasizes "the interplay of psychological and social forces" in an individual's life and details the relationship between that individual and society, a relationship "marked by clashes of unique human possibility with the restraints of social convention" (Abel et al 4-6). Traditionally, these novels tell of the process by which boys mature into men and assume their places in society: in the course of the novel, "the immature protagonist finally comes to a reconciliation of individual and social demands and an acceptance of his place in the community" (Felski 137).

As they focus upon "the interaction between individual and environment" (Braendlin 77), these traditional Bildungsroman share many characteristics. The first is that the protagonist is a member of a majority group in sex, race, and class. Most often, this means a middle to upper-class white male. Second, the protagonist usually belongs to a

community composed of family, friends, and role models. Third, in order to grow into his place in society, the protagonist must separate himself from this supportive group and begin a solitary search. Fourth, the protagonist's search or quest is often an external one with a particular goal and a clear end. Finally, the end result of the traditional Bildungsroman is the protagonist's discovery of self. The protagonist, however, defines himself in terms of the external world and his reactions to it, not in terms of his internal self.

In recent years, however, both the authors of and the characters in the Bildungsroman have changed. The genre is no longer a popular medium for male European coming-of-age stories; David H. Miles claims it has reached its "absolute end" (qtd. in Abel et al 13). Just as it has lost popularity with its traditional authors, the Bildungsroman, adapted to fit the needs of modern sensibilities, has gained popularity with a new group of writers--women, especially black American women. Bonnie Hoover Braendlin notes "the current revival of interest in the Bildungsroman by American marginality-group writers" (76).

The main theme of these modern Bildungsroman focuses upon the conflict the minority characters encounter between self and society. These women must first overcome a number of obstacles in order to develop selves and then struggle to preserve these selves in a hostile environment. Braendlin

claims that these works examine "the particular identity and adjustment problems of people whose sex or color renders them unacceptable to the dominant society" (75). Because the visibility of black people to white culture is limited, blacks are "consistently reduced and reified, losing their independent reality" (Davis 324). The modern Bildungsroman is considered an important vehicle that addresses social and cultural issues, especially those concerning the regaining of an "independent reality" as a member of a minority group. According to Rita Felski, the Bildungsroman is "acquiring a new function as an articulation of women's new sense of identity and increasing movement into public life" (137).

Because these new Bildungsroman are often by and about black women, the traditional model of the genre must be revolutionized. Not only are the sex and color of the protagonist different, but the quest itself and end result are altered as well. For example, this type of Bildungsroman introduces a protagonist who is a member of a minority group, as opposed to the majority group of the traditional Bildungsroman. This minority can be defined by sex, race, class, or a combination of the three. These protagonists are often lower-class black women whose positions are "doubly difficult" because they are not just women in a male-oriented society but they are "black women in a society whose female ideal is a white 'doll baby'" (Davis 329).

Another important distinction between the two forms of the genre is the protagonist's participation in the community. While the female protagonist is rarely a member of a large peer group or a nurturing family, she does forge important relationships in her life, often with other women. The modern Bildungsroman recognizes the importance of "interpersonal relationships that figure prominently in the formation of personality" (Braendlin 77). Unlike the male protagonist, the successful female protagonist doesn't isolate herself from this group in order to mature. In fact, it is not unusual for women characters to "share the formative voyage with friends, sisters, or mothers who assume equal status as protagonists" (Abel et al 12).

A third distinction involves the quest itself. The female protagonist's search or quest is very different from that of her male counterpart in both object and technique. Instead of a physical quest for a specific object or goal, the female protagonist conducts an internal search in order to learn more about herself. The end result of her quest, then, is the discovery of a self that is defined by and for herself.<sup>1</sup>

Because their density allows for a variety of readings, Toni Morrison's novels have been critiqued in a number of ways. However, very little work has been done to study these novels as potential Bildungsroman. Robert James Butler argues that "Morrison's fiction shows us options, not heroes or heroines" (75). Instead of concentrating on these options,

however, I prefer to place the emphasis on Morrison's characters themselves. I find the maturations of these characters not only instructive of social and psychological reality but also a connecting link among the novels. These characters are concerned with themselves and their relationship to the world around them because they have to be: they "are inescapably involved with problems of perception, definition, and meaning" (Davis 323). Many of them are black women who are twice excluded from "mainstream society" -- they are "doubly defined as failures and outsiders" (Davis 329). Because of the unique problems faced by these characters as they search for themselves, their processes of development deserve critical attention.

Interestingly enough, however, Morrison has also written a novel in which a black man's maturation and development is the main focus -- Song of Solomon. While few critics have examined Morrison's four other novels as "coming of age" works, Song of Solomon has received critical attention as a Bildungsroman. In this thesis, I will first examine Song of Solomon as a novel of Milkman Dead's development and a "transitional" Bildungsroman that links traditional forms of the genre to modern ones. Then I will discuss, in chronological order, representative female characters from Morrison's five novels and compare their development to Milkman's. I have chosen these characters because of the ways in which they attempt to develop selves in the course of the

novels. In The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, and Beloved, I will also show a progression in the methods used and success achieved by these female characters' development. Characters in these works move from being thwarted in the early stages of development to successfully realizing a sense of self. Where Song of Solomon explores a black man's successful quest for self, Tar Baby and Beloved go on to show two different but equally successful journeys by black women.

II: SONG OF SOLOMON

## Milkman Dead

Toni Morrison's third novel, Song of Solomon, focuses upon the development of its protagonist, Macon "Milkman" Dead. Although his race excludes him from being a member of the American socio-economic majority, Milkman's upbringing is traditionally middle class in financial status and attitudes. As a young man, he begins both to work for his father and to share his father's values.

Milkman's father, Macon Dead, "serves only himself" (Blake 82) with his business and "almost destroys his entire family in the pursuit of more and more property" (Christian, "Community" 51). An example of Macon's selfishness is his attitude toward his tenants. One woman arrives at Macon's office and tries to explain that her rent payments are past due because she is raising additional children. Macon's response to this plea is "Can they make it in the street, Mrs. Bains? That's where they gonna be if you don't figure out some way to get me my money" (SoS 21). With this lack of compassion as an example, Milkman begins to espouse his father's beliefs. Milkman's attitudes make him essentially a member of the majority.

Like the protagonist in a traditional Bildungsroman, Milkman is also a member of a community of men. While his father has chosen assimilation as his method of surviving in a predominantly white culture, Milkman's friends choose black

nationalism. These friends include Guitar, a member of the radical Seven Days organization; Freddie, a janitor; and Railroad Tommy, the local barber. The Seven Days work to avenge the deaths of black people by killing white people in an effort to keep the ratio between the races even. Milkman "hangs out" with these and other men at the barber shop and the neighborhood bar, Mary's and is forced to reconcile the tension he feels between his father's outlook and his friends' points of view. In his family, Milkman models himself mostly after his father: he sees Ruth, his mother, as largely ineffectual and not worth his time. While Pilate, his aunt, and Hagar, his cousin, figure prominently in Milkman's life, men dominate his group of friends.

Milkman is also, however, Pilate's nephew. Because of her, "the uncomfortable boy forsores a future, is given a sense of purpose" (Fabre 110). Where Macon encourages his son to embrace traditional beliefs like his own, Pilate encourages Milkman to explore for himself and define his own values. While Macon is obsessed with possessing things, "Pilate is not interested in possession. She has no vanity" (Jones and Vinson 148). Pilate's concern with family and connectedness shows Milkman that there is more to life than renting tenant houses. Instead of degrading him as Macon does, Pilate makes Milkman "feel tall" (SoS 50). It is ultimately her influence in his life that allows Milkman to place himself in the context of his ancestors.

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Milkman must separate himself from both his family and friends in order to complete his "identity quest" (Blake 77). He leaves his family because his "parents cannot provide him with the key to understanding and identity" (Skerrett 194). Milkman's mother and father consider him "an extension of self, not really an independent person at all" (Skerrett 194), so he sets out to discover who he is. Milkman also leaves behind his friends, including members of the Seven Days, the brotherhood Susan Blake calls a "dangerous void" which can only be braved "through personal heroism" (79). Milkman must leave his family and friends to "free himself from the wings of other people's nightmares" (Fabre 112). He feels a need, as he tells Guitar, to "do this by himself, with no input from anybody" (SoS 222).

The object of Milkman's quest, like that of the protagonist in the traditional Bildungsroman, is originally an external one -- the gold he and his father think they are entitled to. Macon licks his lips and tells his son "get it and you can have half of it, go wherever you want. Get it. For both of us. Please get it, son. Get the gold" (SoS 173). Milkman begins his journey with plans to find the cave where Pilate and Macon stayed after their father's death and reclaim the gold he believes is there. He has no goal in mind other than finding the gold, taking a "profit from the land of his origins" (Christian, "Community" 51), and returning to

Southside a rich man. The gold gives Milkman's search a definite goal.

In the course of his search for riches, however, Milkman discovers something he isn't originally looking for; he finds a sense of himself as a person. While he "sets out seeking gold . . . he ends up seeking family" (Blake 78). Milkman eventually realizes that "his quest is his culture's: he can only discover what he is by discovering what his family is," and he continues to search for earlier generations of his family (Davis 333). By the end of the novel, Milkman has discovered both himself and his family. According to Barbara Christian, "in his search for the gold Milkman discovers a greater treasure, his real name and his roots in the land" ("Community" 51).<sup>2</sup>

Even in searching for his own roots and role models, Milkman concentrates on the paternal side of his family: he literally "seeks his forefathers" (Davis 338). Just as Macon asserts, "I worked right alongside my father" (SoS 51), Milkman, while in the South, proudly claims his place in his father's life (SoS 236-38). Davis also notes that "other than his mother, his female ancestors are nearly irrelevant" to Milkman and his sense of himself (338). However, Pilate is Milkman's female ancestor, and she figures prominently in his quest.

However, the family line Milkman traces is not only his father's but also Pilate's. If his quest were limited to a

completely male approach, Milkman would have stopped when he discovered his place in the male culture. Because of Pilate's influence in his life, however, his quest doesn't end there. In addition to placing himself in the male family tradition, Milkman also learns to accept responsibility for his actions. Milkman's newly-acquired sense of responsibility is demonstrated when he takes Hagar's hair to carry with him and realizes he "can't just fly on off and leave a body" (SoS 336).

Milkman's journey teaches him to place himself in a community, and, in the final scene of the novel, he faces possibly his greatest challenge within that community. At the end of the novel, Pilate is dead, Guitar is an armed threat, and Milkman must face his former 'brother' alone. He leaps toward Guitar because he's learned the secret of his ancestors--"If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (SoS 341). Like Solomon, he is finally able to fly.

Milkman falls into the trap of "many Morrison characters who try to define themselves through the eyes of others" (Davis 325). These characters who rely on others actually "use others to escape their own responsibility to define themselves" (Davis 325). Milkman discovers who he is not by examining the internal but by watching the external--how other people react to him.

For example, Milkman doesn't realize he behaves like a white man until he stops in the town of Shalimar. There he

suggests that he may just replace his car if repairs are too costly: this careless attitude toward a valuable commodity angers the townspeople. Even though "they looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, they knew he had the heart of the white man" (SoS 269).

It is only after successfully defending himself against Saul and his knife in Solomon's General Store that Milkman realizes how he must look to other people (SoS 270-71). Until prompted by others, he is unable to step back and examine himself. For example, he "finds that only when Guitar Bains shares his dream can he feel 'a self inside himself emerge, a clean-lined definite self' [SoS 184]" (Davis 325).

Song of Solomon, then, serves as a transition between the traditional Bildungsroman and the modern one. It shares many traits with the traditional Bildungsroman: the protagonist is male and part of a group of family and friends, the protagonist separates himself from this group in order to embark on a solitary quest, the object of the quest is external, and the protagonist eventually obtains an externally-defined self. Unlike the traditional Bildungsroman protagonist, however, Milkman is black and therefore a member of a minority group. In addition, although his quest is solitary, Milkman relies on many people for help in reaching his goal. This transitional protagonist, like his traditional counterpart, begins his quest looking for an external goal. However, like the modern protagonist, he finds a definition of himself which corres-

ponds with the external definition. Finally, Song of Solomon displays a protagonist who not only accepts the external definition of himself as presented by society but also realizes his identity doesn't stop with his culture. He finds both "his own identity" and "a connection to society" (Davis 340). Just as Milkman Dead combines qualities of traditional and modern Bildungsroman protagonists, Song of Solomon bridges the gap between the two variations of the genre. In the remainder of this paper, I will examine the development of Morrison's female characters and compare their development to Milkman's.

III: THE BLUEST EYE

## Pecola

The Bluest Eye, Morrison's first novel, details the thwarted development of young Pecola Breedlove. This work discusses Pecola's initiation into adulthood from September of her eleventh year through the summer of her next. During this year, Pecola matures from a child to an adolescent. She begins menstruating, is raped by her father, becomes pregnant, and miscarries. Pecola's development is like Milkman's only in that they are both black and therefore members of a minority group. Aside from this one shared factor, Pecola's self-development is different from Milkman's at every stage.

Unlike the male, middle-class Milkman Dead, Pecola is in no way a member of any majority group. She is one of a number of "double nonentities, Black women" (Smith 171) in Morrison's fiction. In addition to being both Black and a woman, Pecola is also extremely poor: she is truly "a minority in both caste and class" (TBE 18). Pecola is a member of "a society which would rather destroy than accept her" (Bakerman 548) because, among other things, she doesn't fit its expectations of beauty.

While Claudia and Frieda MacTeer are members of a supportive family, the focus of their attention is Pecola. In addition to not belonging to any majority group, Pecola doesn't even belong to a community of family and friends as

Milkman does. In Pecola's world, the "social reality remains an antagonistic and incomprehensible force" (Felski 140).

Pecola lacks a supportive family environment. For example, as the novel opens, Pecola is "outdoors" in every sense of the word: because she has "no place to go" (TBE 18), she is coming to stay with the MacTeers. Not only has Pecola's father, Cholly, destroyed the family's home by setting it on fire, but he has also destroyed any sense of unity that the family members may have had by forcing them to split up in their homelessness. Because Pecola's parents hate both themselves and their children, "they cannot give their children a sense of self, for they have none of their own" (Bakerman 544).

Pecola also lacks a supportive circle of friends like Milkman has. Her only friends are Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, and they are originally ordered by their mother to "be nice to her and not fight" (TBE 17). At school, Pecola is taunted by the other students. One winter day a group of boys surround Pecola and "gaily harassed her" by chanting "Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleps nekked" (TBE 55). Pecola is trapped as a "victim" (TBE 55) until Frieda and Claudia come to her aid, breaking the circle and freeing her from the boys.

In addition to appearing insignificant to her family and peers, Pecola is virtually invisible to society at large. Sometimes, as a form of self-protection, Pecola wants not to

be seen. For example, when her parents fight she tries to vanish:

"Please God," she whispered into the palm of her hand. "Please make me disappear." She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to her elbow. Her feet now. Yes that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. (TBE 39)

At other times people react to Pecola as if she isn't really present. For example, when she goes to buy candy at the grocery store, Mr. Yacobowski "senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see" (TBE 42). When this invisibility is imposed upon her, Pecola becomes angry and tries to reestablish herself because "there is a sense of being in anger" (TBE 42).

Unlike Milkman, Pecola doesn't have to effect a separation from other people to search for herself: she's already isolated. When she takes action, though, she does it



alone with no friends or relatives to help her. For example, Pecola goes by herself to visit Soaphead Church and ask him to grant her one wish--blue eyes (TBE 137). When she believes her wish has been fulfilled, she becomes even more introverted than before by inventing another self to talk to. Her entire existence now consists of the conversations she holds with her "other self."

Like Milkman, Pecola has an external goal for her original quest. As Milkman sets out seeking gold, so Pecola sets out seeking blue eyes. Both of these external goals, however, are symbolic of their real desires: Milkman wants to learn about his father's family in order to place himself in a cultural context, and Pecola wants to be loved, to feel "worthy" (Bakerman 541). The contrast lies in the fact that Milkman realizes the real object of his quest while Pecola never does. Even at the end of the novel, she still believes it is the blue eyes and the beauty they represent that she wants, not the love that is the true goal of her quest.

Also like Milkman, Pecola searches for a sense of self as defined by other people. She longs for blue eyes because she sees them as one of society's requirements for beauty. Pecola "worships the beautiful, and therefore loveable Shirley Temple" (House 185). She watches her mother care tenderly for the daughter of her employer, who is another little blond girl with blue eyes. From these observations, Pecola deduces that blue eyes equal beauty and beauty means love and attention.

Since she wants, more than anything, to be loved, Pecola also wants what she sees as the external symbol of that condition --the blue eyes. She wants to fit society's view of beauty in order to be accepted.

Unlike Milkman's search, Pecola's quest fails. While Milkman discovers a definition of himself that places him in the context of a community myth, Pecola never discovers herself after her trip to Soaphead Church. In order to live with herself and "to escape pain, Pecola finally rejects reality" (House 186).

Pecola attempts to mature and develop, at first progressing "normally" from drinking three quarts of milk a day (TBE 22) to "ministratin'" (TBE 25). Her maturation is thwarted, however, by Cholly's rape. Because of this act, she retreats into madness, the "only refuge available to her" (Bakerman 547), never to develop into a realized individual. Pecola uses the madness to create her own friend and to protect herself because she has no other protection from family, peers, and community. At the end of the novel, Pecola is "the victim of failed initiation" (Bakerman 547) with no sense of herself as a person.

IV: SULA

## Sula and Nel

In Toni Morrison's second novel, Sula, the title character and her childhood friend, Nel, attempt to work toward their development together. Thus they must both be discussed in this section. Barbara Smith says "Morrison depicts in literature the necessary bonding that has always taken place between Black women for the sake of barest survival. Together the two girls can find the courage to create themselves" (177).

Sula and Nel are definitely not members of any socio-economic majority group. Like Pecola, they are "double nonentities" (Smith 171) and discriminated against because of it. Also like Pecola and unlike Milkman, they are both relatively poor. Sula lives in an "enormous house" (Sula 30) ruled by her grandmother, Eva, who takes in borders. Nel's mother is a "hypocritical" and "high-toned" lady (Christian, "Community" 53) who attempts to erase her own past as the daughter of a prostitute by espousing middle-class values. Both Sula and Nel live in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio, the hill referred to as a "nigger joke" (Sula 4) because a black man was tricked into thinking it would be prime farmland.

Unlike Pecola, neither Sula or Nel have childhoods of complete isolation--they have each other. Their friendship is an "idyllic relationship" (House 189) that gives them both strength. However, as girls, the two only have each other:

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neither one is seen as part of a larger group of people because those groups do not present satisfactory communities in which to develop.

Neither Sula nor Nel finds in her family the support she needs to grow and develop as an individual. "Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers . . . they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (Sula 52). Sula's family fails her when she overhears her mother, Hannah Peace tell her friends, "I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference" (Sula 57).

When Nel takes a trip to New Orleans with her mother, she is shocked by Helene's reaction to the conductor's chastising. After he tells Helene, "Now git your butt on in there," she smiles at him (Sula 21). This is when Nel's family fails her: she believes that her mother is "really custard" (Sula 22). After this incident, Nel resolves "to be on guard--always" because she doesn't want anyone to "turn her into jelly" (Sula 22).

As a result of this lack of support from their respective families and a lack of role models, the girls turn to each other: "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be" (Sula 52). Anna Shannon notes that "because the outside world is one of threat and rejection, Sula and Nel require each other for survival" (13). Nel startles Sula out

of her shock at hearing that her own mother doesn't like her, and Sula gives Nel the strength to avoid turning into custard.

Separation also plays a crucial role in this novel. Sula and Nel experience two important separations. The first is a physical one that occurs when Nel marries Jude and Sula leaves town. After ten years, Sula returns and the women seem to have reestablished their closeness. Then the final separation occurs. This estrangement is an emotional one that happens after Nel surprizes Sula and Jude together. Because society is unable to tolerate intimate bonding between women, a break must occur. After this second separation, the two women are never reconciled, even though they both continue to live in the Bottom.

When they are children, Sula and Nel think and act as one. They are practically interchangeable, and each complements the other. When, as children and again immediately after Sula's return to the Bottom, Sula and Nel are friends, they are "two throats and one eye and . . . had no price" (Sula 147). However, when their friendship eventually "ruptures . . . they live isolated, frustrated lives" (Bakerman 549).

The quest motif is not as clearly defined in this novel as it is in Song of Solomon and The Bluest Eye. Sula comes close to following a traditional male pattern in her quest; Shannon calls it "Sula's brave but futile and impulsive attempt to live like a man" (14). She breaks away from her

own family and friends and goes out on a search of her own. Toni Morrison says Sula "did what men do" (Jones and Vinson 148). However, the culture does not react to her as it does to men with the same behavior. Sula is scorned by the Bottom because, as a woman, the culture believes that she shouldn't "attempt to live like a man."

Nel chooses a more traditionally female life. She marries immediately after her graduation from "general school" (Sula 84) and starts a family. She also remains in the Bottom with her parents and the people she's known her entire life. However, "Nel discovers that respectability has its cost" (Shannon 15). In her case, the cost is great--she loses her best friend.

Also unlike Milkman and Pecola, both women in this work are looking for something internal, not an external end like hidden gold or blue eyes. They each spend their lives searching for what they once had together. When Sula sees Nel married, she leaves to look for something to replace their friendship, something else to complete her and make her whole.

Sula "knows from watching her mother and grandmother how little men actually count in the scheme of things" and "insists on her independence" (Shannon 17). She "seeks her own individuality as a means to self-fulfillment" (Christian, "Community" 54). But much of her individuality stems from the security of her friendship with Nel. Therefore, Sula, like Milkman, sets out on a solitary quest: Sula searches to



her final illness. "She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and never could be--for a woman" (Sula 121).

Nel, while she chooses a different path, also attempts to use sex as part of her self-discovery process; however, "Nel's sexuality is not expressed in itself and for her own pleasure, but rather, for the pleasure of her husband and in obedience to a system of ethical judgement and moral virtue" (McDowell 82). She marries Jude because he gives her a "new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly" (Sula 84). With Jude she no longer feels like half of Sula and Nel, but like a separate person. This illusion of individuality, however, is only temporary because, with Jude, Nel is only an extension of him. Eventually, her "love for Jude ... spun a steady gray web around her heart" (Sula 95). After Jude leaves Nel, she is able to examine herself and consider herself in ways she couldn't while he was still present.

Sex, then, only hinders Sula and Nel in their searches for themselves. Neither one of them is able to find a "truly sustaining sexual union" (Bakerman 553). In addition, their relationships with men cannot replace their relationship with each other: "in contrast to the friendship between Sula and Nel, a friendship which promoted growth and independent identities for both women, Sula's passion for Ajax and Nel's marriage to Jude culminate in physical and emotional death" (Shannon 19). A crucial aspect of the female Bildungsroman is



the "process of increasing self-knowledge in the female protagonist" (Felski 131). This knowledge, however, is generally gained by self-examination and "separation from a male-defined context" (Felski 131). After Ajax and Jude leave, Sula and Nel are able to consider themselves as individuals.

Also unlike Milkman and Pecola, Sula and Nel eventually arrive at a partial sense of self that is defined from within. For example, while "Pecola struggles with the fate assigned to her, Sula and Nel help choose their fates" (Bakerman 548). The fact that they were able to, in some way control their lives makes Sula and Nel stronger, more self-reliant characters. While they both "help choose their fates," the two women reach very different stages of development.

Sula is especially unconcerned about what people think about her: she "insists on making herself" (Christian, "Community" 54) instead of allowing the community to make her. Sula "overturns the conventional definition of good and evil in relation to women by insisting that she exists primarily as and for herself--not to be a mother or the lover of men" (Christian, "Trajectories" 241). She returns from her wanderings and does as she pleases in the Bottom, much to the surprise of her neighbors. For example, she places her grandmother in a nursing home, seduces a number of men, and even has an affair with her best friend's husband. Sula "defines herself outside of the sex, class, race definitions

of the society" (Christian, "Class" 76), even to the extent that she ignores others. She claims her "right to create self" (Holloway 24), but she does so at the expense of the only meaningful relationship in her life.

Nel, on the other hand, "belongs to the town and all of its ways" (Sula 120). She remains in the Bottom and does what is expected--fulfills the traditional role of wife and mother. Nel "assumes her natural position, according to the norm of the Bottom" (Christian, "Community" 54). Eventually, though, she realizes that the conventional life doesn't satisfy her. With her cry, "we was girls together'" (Sula 174), Nel realizes that what she really misses isn't her husband but her childhood companion. She discovers that "the great loss she has suffered is really the destruction of their friendship, the one chance they had to learn to be full, complete women" (Bakerman 553), the "possibility for a fuller life than convention allots to women" (Shannon 20). Nel tries to live with her self as it is defined by her society, but she eventually realizes she's missed the chance to define her own self by missing her relationship with Sula.

Because of their estrangements, neither Sula nor Nel is able to create a cohesive self. As Barbara Smith states: "together the two girls can find the courage to create themselves" (177, emphasis mine). Without the support of the other, however, neither woman is able to "create herself" and separately their quests fail.

V: SONG OF SOLOMON

## First Corinthians

In Song of Solomon, the development of Milkman Dead and that of his sister, First Corinthians, is very different. Although Robert James Butler claims Milkman's "mother and sisters remain 'landlocked' all their lives" (64), I argue that First Corinthians manages to break away from her family and develop a sense of herself, even though she doesn't "fly" like her brother.

First Corinthians, like the other female characters discussed in this work, is a member of no majority group. While Milkman is discriminated against as a black, he is also awarded certain privileges because he is a man. For example, he is able to work with Macon in the business while Corinthians and Lena are expected to stay at home and make velvet roses. Although she is a college graduate who has spent a year in France, Corinthians' experience with other people is actually quite limited. Her liberal education at Bryn Mawr "unfit her for eighty percent of the useful work in the world" (SoS 190). Because of her limited experience, First Corinthians' search for herself is even more difficult than her brother's.

Unlike Milkman, First Corinthians has no group of peers and friends. She and her sister Magdalene are each others' only companions. They live at the house on Not Doctor Street with their parents and Milkman well into their adult lives.

Because First Corinthians doesn't work outside the house until she turns forty-one and takes a job as a maid, she doesn't even have the social environment work offers.

Even though she lives with her entire family, First Corinthians reacts to that family very differently from either of her siblings. She separates herself emotionally from them. For example, when Ruth Foster Dead tells a story about meeting a Roman Catholic priest, Magdalene gets caught up in the story itself: she "listened and experienced each phase of her mother's emotion." Milkman, on the other hand, "was only half listening." It is Corinthians who listens "analytically, expectantly--wondering how her mother would develop this anecdote into a situation in which Macon would either lash out at her verbally or hit her" (SoS 66). Corinthians is able, even at the family dinner table, to distance herself from the situation and observe it as a purely social interaction. She knows her mother's power lies in her ability to bring Macon "to a point, not of power . . . but of helplessness" (SoS 64), and this power fascinates her.

In addition to separating herself emotionally from her family, Corinthians also separates herself from them physically. After suffering from a severe depression, Corinthians "made up her mind to get out of the house" (SoS 190). She "breaks out of the sterile routine of her life" (Butler 66) by becoming a maid for Michael-Mary Graham, the State Poet Laureate. However, so that her family will not

forbid her to work, Corinthians tells them she is an amanuensis. She rides the bus to work each day in high heels and her regular clothes, changing to loafers and her uniform only after arriving at Miss Graham's.

Corinthians' separation from her family, then, is a very conscious one. Although she continues to live in her parents' house until she is forty-four, Corinthians purposefully gets her own job and earns "her own money, rather than receiving an allowance like a child" (SoS 191). By obtaining outside employment, Corinthians "has asserted herself and stepped away from her father's shadow" (Bakerman 561). In addition, her separation from her family doesn't stop with the daytime hours she spends across town as a maid.

Corinthians further distances herself from her family by dating Henry Porter, one of her father's tenants and a member of the radical Seven Days organization. Corinthians is at first embarrassed about Porter, "and she hated him a lot for the shame she felt" (SoS 195). When Porter accuses her of being ashamed of him and afraid of Macon discovering their relationship, Corinthians denies the charges. Porter, not believing her, takes her back to her parents' house because he wants "a grown-up woman that's not scared of her daddy" (SoS 197). Instead of returning to her family and the red velvet roses, however, Corinthians finds herself "banging on the car-door window of a yardman" (SoS 199). She "would have smashed her fist through the window just to touch him, feel his heat,

the only thing that could protect her from a smothering death of dry roses" (SoS 200).

After spending the night with Porter for the first time, Corinthians "felt a self-esteem that was quite new" (SoS 202). By the time Milkman returns from his trip to the South, Corinthians has completed a quest of her own. She is finally "out of the house" on Not Doctor Street and into "a small house in Southside, which she shared with Porter" (SoS 338). Her relationship with Porter, then, "saves her from utter stagnation" (Butler 67) in her family-dominated world.

Also unlike Milkman, First Corinthians' search is not for an external goal. While the money from her job delights her, it is not the main reason she works; she enjoys employment for the chance to get away from her oppressive home environment. She also relishes the opportunity to discover a sense of herself as a person separate from her family.

Where Milkman's self is very much defined by society, Corinthians eventually comes to a definition of herself that she has created. She makes a conscious decision to leave her family's house, and then she finds a way out of their home and into her own. The end result is a woman who has discovered new strengths within herself.

Robert James Butler argues that "characters such as Corinthians do achieve satisfying lives by settling down to conventional married lives" (74). However, I don't find First Corinthians' relationship with Henry Porter to be anything

near conventional. Corinthians takes a number of risks -- social, cultural, economic -- in order to continue seeing the man she loves. In fact, the novel itself never mentions a marriage between them: it is only Milkman's "guess" that the Seven Days "would be looking for a new recruit" (SoS 338). Corinthians' decision to leave her family and live with Porter is a very brave one. As Barbara Smith writes, "self definition is a very dangerous activity for any woman to engage in, especially a Black woman" (178). First Corinthians Dead faces this danger and emerges a self-defined woman.

VI: TAR BABY

## Jadine

Tar Baby, Toni Morrison's fourth novel, details the "struggle to find one's identity and choose one's destiny" (Bell 56). In this work, Jadine Childs, a 25-year-old "copper Venus" (TB 115), takes a hiatus from her modeling career in Paris to visit her aunt and uncle on the Caribbean Isle des Chevaliers and face decisions about her life. One important issue Jadine considers is a marriage offer from Ryk, "the most glamorous man in Paris" who is "dying to marry her" (Bell 56). Another is the fact that, because of her age, she is nearing the end of her career.

Jadine is not as obviously a minority as the other female protagonists in Morrison's work because she has much of what they lack -- money, beauty, a career, and social mobility. Unlike Pecola, Sula, and First Corinthians, Jadine is wealthy. Because of the financial support of Valerian Street, her aunt and uncle's employer, she has had the opportunity to live abroad and earn a doctorate in Art History from the Sorbonne (TB 116). Jadine is also beautiful: she has appeared on the cover of Elle and is the model who, according to her Aunt Ondine, "made those white girls disappear. Just disappear right off the page" (TB 40). In addition, because of her intelligence, wealth, and beauty, Jadine is very socially mobile in both Paris and New York. She travels often, and her society includes "Blacks and whites in profusion" (TB 126).



Also unlike other female Morrison protagonists, Jadine belongs to a nurturing community. Although she is an orphan, her Uncle Sydney and Aunt Ondine dote on her as their own child. In addition, Jadine has the financial and emotional support of the Streets, who treat her more like a daughter than their employees' niece. She also has a wide acquaintance in both Europe and the United States and a diverse circle of friends.

However, like the characters discussed earlier, Jadine separates herself from this community when she decides to search for herself. She moves to L'Arbe de la Croix to give herself both geographic and mental distance in order to consider her options. For example, the idea of marrying Ryk worries her: "I guess the person I want to marry is him, but I wonder if the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl?" (TB 48).

While staying at L'Arbe de la Croix, Jadine meets a black man named Son, a "man who prized fraternity" (TB 205). During their first conversation, he asks her if she "belongs" to anyone on the island; Jadine responds "I belong to me" (TB 118). Son goes on to accuse her of being a "little white girl" and claims he has the authority to tell her "what a black woman is or ought to be" (TB 121). Throughout Jadine's entire relationship with Son, this tension remains: he believes he can tell Jadine what she ought to be while she claims that right for herself. An integral part of Jadine's

self-definition, then, is the fact that she defines herself in opposition to Son and his notion of ideal black womanhood.

Because she feels a primal pull toward Son, Jadine believes it is important to understand his past. In an attempt to do just that, she journeys with him to his hometown of Eloë, Florida. This neighborhood is hardly the utopia Son makes it out to be--it is actually a backwoods town with very sexist attitudes, "a country of the past" (Christian, "Class" 79). Jadine cannot "understand (or accept) her being shunted off with Ellen and the children while the men grouped on the porch and, after a greeting, ignored her" (TB 246). Neither can she understand why Son leaves her alone with these women with "worshipful stares and nonconversation" (TB 251) or why the two of them must stay in separate houses in Eloë when they've been living together in New York. The people of Eloë look at Son "with love," but they examine Jadine "like she was a Cadillac" Son had either won or stolen (TB 254).

Pearl Bell argues that Jadine needs to be "saved" from her present state: "only a man like Son, in sure possession of ancestral values, can redeem Jadine, who has sacrificed her tribal soul to 'white' sophistication and learning" (57). Bell also thinks Morrison has "envisioned Son as a noble savage" (57). However, Toni Morrison describes Son in less glowing terms. In an interview with Kay Bonetti, when asked about Son's options, Morrison states that Son does have a

choice about how to live his life: "He can join the twentieth century or not join the twentieth century."

In addition to separating herself from both family and friends on her quest for herself, Jadine must also eventually separate herself from Son. After attempting to continue her search with Son by visiting Eloë with him, Jadine returns to New York and then realizes she must leave him to find herself. Jadine comes to understand that her relationship with Son is "oppressive and alienating" (Felski 133). Because her "autonomy cannot be asserted in a repressive environment" (Felski 134), Jadine removes herself from the most repressive influence--Son. While Jadine confronts the conflicts in her life, Son's "solution is to retreat, run, opt out" (Christian, "Class" 79). She continues her quest, then, like the other characters discussed--essentially alone--and discovers "aleness tasted good" (TB 275).

The object of Jadine's quest, however, is not an external one like Milkman's gold. Jadine has no real need for additional material possessions: she already owns a magnificent sealskin coat and over thirty-two thousand dollars worth of jewelry (TB 117). Instead of conducting an external search, Jadine is very aware of her internal one for a sense of self.

Finally, Jadine arrives at her own definition of herself as an independent and strong woman. She no longer accepts the superficial definition society has given her based on her

beauty. For Jadine, her identity is "internal rather than socially produced" (Felski 134). She chooses her autonomy over Son's fraternity. At the end of the novel, Jadine continues to reject "any pressures which would limit her protean identity" (Butler 62-63). When she was twelve, she decided "never to be broken in the hands of any man" (TB 124), and she sticks to that decision by regaining her independence.

Jadine is hardly the "unwilling Delilah sucking at the Samson strength of Son" (146) that Eleanor W. Traylor makes her out to be. Jadine rejects Eloë and Son because she "does not wish to be the lady dependent on the husband's wealth and status" (Christian, "Class" 78). To her, "independence means looking out for herself" (Christian, "Class" 78), and that is what she does when she returns to Paris. Jadine creates her own definition of racial identity and rejects Son's outdated one. In response to Ondine's statement that she needs to learn to be a daughter (TB 281) before becoming a woman, Jadine claims "there are other ways to be a woman" (TB 282). She creates one of these ways for herself. Instead of depending upon Son for "redemption," Jadine redeems herself: "she was the safety she longed for" (TB 290).

V: BELOVED

## Denver

Denver, the teenager in Morrison's most recent novel, Beloved, achieves a difficult but successful maturation. In this post-Civil War historical novel, Denver struggles to reconnect herself and her mother, Sethe, to their community. Judith Thurman writes that "Sethe has, in fact, never fully 'delivered' Denver. Fat, dreamy submissive, fearful of the world, and fixated upon her moment of entry into it, Denver will be forced to complete the labor by herself" (178). In the course of the novel, Denver manages just that--she completes her own birth and becomes a young woman with her own sense of self.

Like most of Morrison's protagonists, Denver is not a member of a majority group. She is a "lonely, 'secretive' adolescent" (Thurman 178) who is also black, poor, and relatively uneducated. At the beginning of the novel, Sethe supports the two of them by working as a cook in a local restaurant while Denver spends her time at home alone at the house at 124 Bluestone Road.

Denver is also the most isolated character in this study. As a young child, she had attended the neighborhood "school" for black children, held in Lady Jones's front parlor. While there and interacting with her peers, a classmate's question about Sethe caused Denver to withdraw from school. When Denver realized that her mother killed one of her children and

would have killed the rest to keep them out of slavery, she retreated to her home as a form of self-defense against the world. Because of Nelson Lord's question, Denver by herself has not left the yard surrounding her home for twelve years. While Paul D, one of Sethe's friends from slavery, comes to visit Sethe and Denver, the three of them attend a carnival. This event is the only instance of Denver leaving the yard surrounding 124 until near the end of the novel.

In addition to being isolated from her peers for twelve years, Denver is also isolated from her own family. Her grandmother, Baby Suggs, is dead; her two older brothers, Howard and Buglar, have left home; and her father, Halle, never made the escape from slavery. Denver and Sethe are not particularly close either: Denver is somewhat afraid of her mother because she senses Sethe's capacity for violence. Because she remains in the house and yard, Denver has no contact with other neighborhood people either.

While Denver doesn't belong to either a group of peers or the community as a whole, she does have an extraordinary relationship. In spite of the many isolating factors in her life, Denver communicates with one important force--her dead sister, both as a baby ghost and a young woman called Beloved. Denver is very much attuned to the baby ghost, as is shown when Paul D arrives at 124 in 1873. While he and Sethe reminisce and exclude Denver from their conversation, Denver begins to "long, downright long" (Beloved 12) and "wish"

(Beloved 13) for the baby ghost as a distraction. Finally she mentions the ghost and Paul D and Sethe "were not a twosome any more" (Beloved 13). When the ghost eventually makes its presence known by causing the house to pitch and shift, "Denver burst from the keeping room, terror in her eyes, a vague smile on her lips" (Beloved 18). Denver is both afraid of the power of her dead baby sister and pleased that the ghost responded to her wishes because "whatever her power and however she used it, Beloved was hers" (Beloved 104).

When Denver was still attending school and Nelson Lord asked her the question concerning Sethe's responsibility for the baby's death, Denver went deaf. Because she couldn't bear to confront Sethe's role in the death of own daughter, Denver "blocked up her ears" (Beloved 252). This condition lasted for two years: it was only the sound of the baby ghost making its way up the stairs that brought Denver out of her silent world (Beloved 103). Although Sethe thought the noise was the boys bouncing a ball and Baby Suggs believed it to be the family dog, Denver immediately identified it as her baby sister (Beloved 103).

After Nelson Lord's question brought on her deafness, Denver withdrew into herself. Since she couldn't communicate verbally with others, Denver began to fix her concentration on the baby ghost--"it held for her all the anger, love and fear she didn't know what to do with" (Beloved 103). Rita Felski discusses the ways in which language can be an alienating

force, especially for women. She states: "there is a need for women to overcome speechlessness, to break through the silences and find a language through which to articulate their desires" (143).<sup>3</sup>

When a "fully dressed woman" (Beloved 50) is waiting for Paul D, Sethe, and Denver as they return from the carnival, Denver immediately recognizes her as the baby sister she lost. She not only knows who Beloved is but understands her odd behavior and craves contact with her: Denver "looked at this sleepy beauty and wanted more" (Beloved 53).

The most telling aspect of Denver's identification with Beloved, however, occurs when the two girls go into the dark "cold house" together (Beloved 121-24). Here Beloved disappears and Denver cries, realizing that this experience is even more terrifying than the feelings she had upon Paul D's arrival. When Paul D and Sethe formed a "twosome" (Beloved 13), Denver became truly "lonely" (Beloved 12) because she felt her mother slipping away from her and toward Paul D. But losing Beloved hurts Denver even more. When Paul D and Sethe left Denver out, she cried "for herself. Now she is crying because she has no self" (Beloved 123). Denver so completely identifies with Beloved that, when the other woman disappears, Denver has nothing left.

In addition to identifying herself with Beloved, Denver also plays a nurturing role in their relationship. When Beloved first appears, Denver possessively nurses her through



her illness. "Denver tended her, watched her sound sleep, listened to her labored breathing" (Beloved 54) and, through this experience, learns patience and compassion. Later, Denver feeds and cares for both Beloved and Sethe--"washing, cooking, forcing, cajoling her mother to eat a little now and then" (Beloved 250).

Toni Morrison claims she "started out wanting to write a story about the feeling of Self. Women feel themselves best through nurturing" (Clemons 75). Denver, by nurturing Beloved and Sethe, begins to feel her own self emerge. She has learned and accepted "the responsibility of daughterhood" (Denard 177) and is on her way to becoming her own woman.

Eventually Denver discovers that "the job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved" (Beloved 243). When Denver realizes that only she can save Sethe's life, she makes an "anguished existential choice" (Braendlin 78). Denver leaves the yard that has bordered her life for twelve years and "step[s] off the edge of the world" (Beloved 243). Like Milkman, Denver takes this first step toward the community alone. Also like Milkman, she not only begins to fit her family back into a community but she also begins to discover her own self. When she visits Lady Jones and is called "baby," Denver later realizes that this one word "inagurated her life in the world as a woman" (Beloved 248).

Although Denver's immediate quest is for tangible objects, the most obvious of which is food, she is also looking for herself. Because "the process of self-discovery involves a process of confrontation and dialogue with a social environment" (Felski 138), Denver discovers herself as she rediscovers her surroundings. Like Milkman, Denver has to learn and confront her family heritage, especially in terms of how the past affects the present. She also has to reforge the link between the inhabitants of 124 and the larger community.

Denver makes especially important contacts with the women of the community. According to Rita Felski, "encounters with other women . . . form a central part of the discovery process" (135). When Denver decides to "stop relying on kindness" (Beloved 252) and look for a job, she visits the Bodwins. This white brother and sister had helped both Baby Suggs and Sethe in the past, so Denver hopes they will assist "the third generation as well" (Beloved 252). At the Bodwins' she meets Janey Wagon, the Bodwins' servant. Denver tells "this stranger what she hadn't told Lady Jones" (Beloved 253) --that another woman is living in 124 with Sethe. In return for this information, Janey convinces the Bodwins to hire Denver as night help, to stay in their house in case they need anything after Janey has gone home.

Through her efforts, Denver eventually reestablishes her family's ties to the society of which it was once such an integral part. Whereas earlier "the present alone interested

Denver" (Beloved 119), her step into the world causes her to think about the future. She realizes it is "a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (Beloved 252).

Denver has also matured in whom she cares for.

At the beginning of the novel, she doesn't care about anyone, then she progresses to taking care of Beloved. Eventually, Denver makes a commitment to her mother and cares for Sethe in addition to Beloved. Finally, Nelson Lord's casual "Take care of yourself, Denver" is able to "open" (Beloved 252) Denver's mind, just as she is in the process of opening her family to the community. Denver can now begin to see herself as an individual, a self-sufficient person who can interact and form relationships with both black and white people. She has moved beyond Baby Suggs' "there is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks" (Beloved 89) and has learned to trust. Denver has finally created and defined herself instead of allowing society to impose a definition upon her.

## VI: CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison's novels have been criticized in many ways. Among the accusations is one leveled by Mel Watkins that she is improperly more concerned with issues of sexism than racism. He claims her work and the work of other black feminists "presents brutal, barely human straw men who exist only to demonstrate the humanity of the protagonists or antagonists with whom they are concerned" (36). Morrison has also been charged with only presenting day-to-day issues, not those involving higher-order thinking. Pearl Bell, while reviewing Tar Baby, writes that "the pursuit of the authentic self is the last thing one would expect in a novel by Toni Morrison" (56).

Neither one of these arguments, however, is a valid one. It is ridiculous to assume that a black woman writer should choose the greater of two social injustices and limit herself to either racism or sexism because, after all, she must contend with both. In addition, Morrison doesn't merely portray male characters as "straw men"--she provides her readers with enough background information to understand the men's motivations. For example, when Cholly Breedlove rapes Pecola, the reader glimpses his confusion, hurt, and anger at not having anything to give his daughter. In addition, I find her characters very much concerned with self-definition: in order to survive as minority women in a majority culture, they

must be. And in order to develop that self, these characters must confront issues of both sexism and racism.

The characters in Morrison's novels are faced with progressive complexity in their lives. One example of this occurs in their education. Where Pecola drops out of school at the age of twelve, Jadine earns a doctorate and Denver the opportunity to resume her education. The characters also achieve progressively more interaction with others. The community as a unit moves from a hostile force that alienates Pecola to a nurturing system that aids Denver and eventually helps exorcise Beloved from 124. The protagonists also move from a strictly black society into a racially mixed one. Pecola and Nel remain in their black communities throughout the novels; First Corinthians travels abroad before returning to Southside; Jadine moves easily from continent to continent, with a variety of both black and white friends on each; and Denver learns to trust the "whitefolks" Baby Suggs warned her about.

The Bildungsroman is a useful vehicle for examining the ways Morrison ignores the "man-hating" point of view Watkins describes in favor of the "pursuit of an authentic self" that so surprises Bell. Using this genre as a point of reference allows for a close examination of one recurring aspect of the novels--the self-development of the female characters. By focusing on this development, a chronological progression becomes evident.

Toni Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye, paints a bleak picture of Pecola's female development. Pecola views her dilemma as a simple one that a change of eye color can solve. She is left with virtually no choices, ostracized by the community, and unable to realize any sense of herself. With Claudia and Frieda, as in Sula and Song of Solomon, Morrison presents women who come closer to realizing themselves than Pecola does. Nel and Sula mature until their development is stunted by their two separations. First Corinthians is eventually, at the age of forty-four, able to move out of her parents' house and into a home of her own with the man she loves.

In Morrison's second and fourth novels, she introduces Sula and Jadine as self-confident women. These two characters refuse to accept the traditional roles assigned to their race and sex and resent the way other black women accept them. "Thus, even at the risk of distancing themselves from other black women, they seek to assert a sense of self defined outside the parameters set for women by the black community as well as by the society at large" (Denard 173). However, this self-imposed separation is not without its faults. Sula and Jadine both lack the sense of community crucial to complete self-development.

In her fifth novel, Beloved, Morrison introduces her most successful self-seeker--Denver. Denver is successful because she is able to combine both her individuality and her

community. According to Carolyn Denard, Morrison finds separation "futile" and believes "the connection to the ethnic community should be nourished instead of minimized" (174-75). It is this vital connection that Denver learns to nourish.

In addition to balancing her self and her community, Denver also accepts "the responsibility of daughterhood" (Denard 177) when she goes out into the world to save Sethe's life. None of Morrison's other female protagonists learns to accept this form of responsibility. Sula rejects daughterhood when she watches her mother burn and again when she places her grandmother in a nursing home. When Jadine's Aunt Ondine tells her "a girl has got to be a daughter first" (TB 281), Jadine replies "I don't want to be that kind of woman" (TB 282).

Beloved, then, presents Morrison's most successful example of female Bildungsroman. Through Denver's struggle to regain a sense of herself within the context of her community, Toni Morrison demonstrates the ways in which a black woman, given the resources and opportunities, can find and define herself.

The Bildungsroman is far from a dead genre. With its current modifications, the "coming of age" study is an especially effective tool for examining Toni Morrison's novels. It allows for deeply probing the questions of self and society and applying theories of development to a fascinating array of black women. This genre also links the

works together and shows the growth both of Morrison and of her characters.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For further background on the ways in which women develop senses of themselves, see Belenky et al, Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind; Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development; Rubin, Intimate Strangers: Men and Women Together.

<sup>2</sup>For a more detailed discussion concerning Milkman's relationship to his community, see Blake, "Folklore and Community in Song of Solomon"; Christian, "Community and Nature: The Nature of Toni Morrison"; and Davis, "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction."

<sup>3</sup>For an in-depth examination of silences and the roles they play in the lives of women, see Olsen, Silences.

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